

BLAKE
CROUCH

DESERT PLACES, LOCKED DOORS, & ABANDON

BADGIRL



BAD GIRL

by BLAKE CROUCH

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For more information about the author, please visit www.blakecrouch.com.

For more information about the artist, please visit www.jeroentenberge.com.

Indianapolis, 1995

Lucy sat down at one of the few empty tables on the perimeter of the hotel bar and hoped none of the waitresses would notice her. She was fifteen years old, and even wearing the makeup she'd taken from her mother's vanity, she knew her chances of getting served a drink were remote. Worse, she was taking up real estate that legal customers willing to pay ten dollars for a mediocre glass of wine could have inhabited. And there were plenty of them about, the bar nearly full and the hotel lobby bustling with well-dressed adults older than her mom.

The convention didn't technically begin until tomorrow morning, so none of them wore name badges. But she felt sure her eyes were passing over famous mystery writers, perhaps even people she'd read. The man she'd come to see, Andrew Z. Thomas, the convention's guest of honor, for whom she'd stolen her mother's car and driven six hundred miles on a learner's permit, had yet to make his appearance. Just the thought of him being in the same building made her knees feel weak.

"Hi there."

Lucy turned and met eyes with a waitress now standing at her table, a pretty girl, probably in college, her dirty blond hair drawn back into a ponytail.

Lucy said, "Could I just get a water, please?"

"I'm afraid you can't sit here, sweetie."

"Why not?"

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

The waitress laughed. "I'm twenty-three, sister. You ain't twenty-two."

"Please don't make me leave. I don't—"

"I'll get in trouble if the manager sees you sitting in my section. I'm sorry."

Lucy stared at the waitress, then lifted her handbag off the table and climbed down from the chair. They'd already refused her a room because of her age. Now this. What a mean hotel.

She was two inches shy of five feet, and she felt even smaller threading her way through the groups of conversing adults in the lobby.

"—got a two-book deal for mid-six figures, which just strikes me as a crime considering his last didn't even hit—"

“—switched agents—”

“—not sure if my editor’s coming or not. She was supposed to have finished my manuscript by now—”

“—and every time I turn around, Darling’s right there, like he’s stalking me or—”

The smell of cologne, perfume, wine breath, and cigarette smoke overpowering.

She broke out of the crowd and found a cluster of unoccupied chairs and plopped down in one. From this distance, the din of conversations mixed together like the static of a waterfall. She leaned back in the leather chair and stared up the full height of the twenty-one story atrium, the uncomfortable pang in her gut not all that dissimilar to what she experienced every day in the high school cafeteria. Invisibility. The people around her untouchable, unreachable, as characters in a movie while she watched them onscreen from the darkness of an empty theater. This sense, that had been with her for as long as she could remember, even before her father had died, that she wasn’t a participant in any of this. In anything really. Only an observer.

When Lucy straightened in her chair, she saw that a man now sat across from her. He looked old to her, though he wasn’t even thirty. Sports jacket. Khaki slacks. Sending out big wafts of cologne which she thought smelled pretty. He seemed either angry or nervous, and he kept looking at his watch like he was waiting for someone, but if he was, they never came.

She watched him, and the third time their eyes met, the man gave a thin smile and nodded.

He didn’t have a name badge either, but Lucy took a stab anyway. “Are you a writer?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Are you a writer?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.” The man looked at his watch again. “Are you here for the convention?” she asked.

“Yep.”

“What books have you written?”

“Well, my first one just came out two months ago.”

“What’s it called?”

“*A Death in the Family.*”

“I’ve never heard of it. What’s it about?”

“Um, it’s...well, it’s like, it’s about this big family in Portland who has this reunion and one of the older brothers is killed. Or rather he’s found dead, and the police come and make everyone stay while they investigate. What you’d call a locked-room mystery, I guess.”

“Is it good?”

“I like to think so.”

“Will they have it in the book room?”

“I don’t know. I hope so.”

“Do you have a copy with you?”

“Not on me. Look, it was very nice meeting you, but I have a, um... something to get to.”

“I’m Lucy.”

“Mark.”

Lucy watched Mark wander back toward the hotel bar where he stood on the perimeter of the crowd. He looked around and kept glancing at his watch. After awhile, he turned away and started back through the lobby to the elevators.

Lucy stood up and grabbed her handbag and followed.

The middle elevator in a row of three lifted out of the lobby, and through its glass, she could see Mark leaning against the railing inside, looking out across the hotel.

She watched it climb. Counted the stories until it stopped and then followed Mark’s progress onto the fourteenth floor, counting doors to the room he disappeared inside.

Lucy rode alone, watching the lobby fall away beneath her as the elevator car soared up the back wall of the atrium.

She walked the exposed hallway, the noise from the lobby faint up here and no one else about. From the door beside 1428, she grabbed a “Do Not Disturb” sign and hooked it on the door to Mark’s room.

Then she put her ear to the door, couldn’t hear anything. Knocked.

In a minute, it swung open, and Mark, now wearing only a white oxford shirt and khaki pants, stood staring down at her, looking both confused and vaguely annoyed.

He said, “Yes?”

“It’s Lucy.”

"I'm sorry, what do you want?"

"I just wanted to see your book. The one you told me about."

"You followed me to my room to see my book?"

"Yeah. It sounded good."

"Look, maybe I'll see you downstairs tomorrow, and if you buy one of my books, I'll even sign it for you. How would that be?"

Lucy furrowed her brow and made what she hoped resembled a wounded expression. "Why don't you like me, Mark?"

"I don't...dislike you, I don't even..."

She put her face into her hands and pretended to cry.

"Jesus."

"You're the first real author I've ever met. I don't know anyone here."

"Where are your parents?"

"My mom's in our room watching 'Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman.'"

He sighed. "If I invite you in—and only for a minute—will you stop crying?"

"Yes."

"All right, come on in, Lucy."

Lucy wiped her face and followed Mark into the hotel room. His suitcase lay on the bed, open but not yet unpacked, and Mark was bending over a cardboard box and trying to tear open the top.

"I brought twenty copies of *A Death in the Family*." He pulled a trade paperback out of the box and handed it to her. Lucy thumbed through the pages, skimmed the flap copy on the back.

The cover was of a gravestone, the book's title engraved into the stone above the author's name: Mark Darling.

"Is anybody else sharing the room with you?" Lucy asked.

He tilted his head slightly, like he couldn't comprehend the question. "No, just me."

"I need to use the bathroom."

"Right through that door."

"Would you sign this for me while I pee?"

"Um, sure."

She gave back the book and walked into the bathroom and closed the door.

"Write something good!" she called out from inside.

She did have to pee actually, and when she'd finished, she flushed the toilet and washed her hands and took all of her clothes off. She folded them and stacked them on top of her black Chuck Taylors on the toilet basin under a towel, then turned her attention to her handbag.

The marble of the sink was cold against the soles of her bare feet. She walked down to the end and crouched down beside the door.

She'd been in the bathroom more than five minutes already, and she crouched there another five, her legs beginning to cramp, before Mark's voice passed finally through the door.

"Lucy?" he said.

She brought her hand to her mouth to suppress the giggle. She'd imagined this a hundred times, and something about the moment finally being here struck her as funny and surreal. It was the strangest thing. Her body felt all tingly, like whenever she had been around Bobby Cockrell, the first boy in high school she'd had a major crush on.

"You've been in there awhile," Mark said. "Everything okay?"

She didn't answer.

"Lucy, I need to get back down to the lobby."

Silence, Lucy smiling.

"I'm opening the door, all right? Are you um...are you decent?"

She watched the doorknob turn and the door ease open.

Mark's head appeared.

"Lucy?"

She was right beside him, well within reach, but he didn't see her. Kept looking at the toilet, and then the shower, as if trying to piece together how this girl had vanished through the walls.

Lucy reached out and pulled the blade of her dead father's Zwilling J.A. Henckels straight razor through his windpipe in a quick, delicate swipe and the blood from his carotid artery sprayed her face and she squealed with delight as Mark clutched his throat and stared wild-eyed at her.

He staggered over to the sink and looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and all of that blood pouring out of his throat down the front of his white Oxford with a kind of disbelief, Lucy giggling as Mark tried to physically squeeze the opening in his neck back together but the blood kept coming and he gave up and started toward Lucy with a madness in his eyes but the floor was slicked with his blood and his feet shot out from under him.

He slammed flat on his back and his head cracked against the tile.

Lucy slid off the sink and stepped carefully across the floor, dodging the bigger pools of blood and watching a puddle widen around Mark's head, his eyes already beginning to glaze and his hands at his side.

She stood there watching him bleed out and when he finally stopped twitching and blinking, she set the straight razor on the sink. Lucy weighed eighty-three pounds at her last physical, and she figured Mark had at least a hundred on her, but the shower wasn't far. She only had to drag him over a two-inch lip and the blood on the floor provided decent lubrication for the job.

When she'd crammed him into the shower, she closed the glass door and looked at the bathroom.

Blood everywhere. Spots and spatters and streaks on the mirror, the walls, even the ceiling.

What a mess.

What a beautiful mess.

She got down on her knees and flattened herself across the tile and rolled through the pools of blood which were sticky and cool and gave off a dank metallic smell like a thunderstorm coming.

Lucy stood for a long time watching herself in the mirror, kept thinking it looked like she had the most lovely body art imaginable, how she wanted to walk naked through the lobby just like this and soak in the stares. What would Andrew Thomas think to see her like this? She suspected he might love her.

The blood was growing cold and beginning to congeal on her skin when she slid open the shower door and stepped inside. Bending down, she pushed Mark up against the wall and curled up to him, her spine against his chest. She draped his arm around her and closed her eyes and went to sleep.

Woke in the middle of the night, cold and shivering. Turned the shower on full blast and let the hot water pound the blood out of her hair and her face. She collected her clothes from under the towel atop the basin—not a drop of blood on them—and grabbed the robe off the back of the door and slipped out of the bathroom.

Mark's wallet sat on top of the television, and she went through it and pocketed two key cards and two hundred in cash. She dressed and left the room. Rode down to the lobby which was mostly empty now save for a

handful of die-hards who'd persevered beyond last call to sing drunken show tunes on a leather couch.

Outside, the autumn air was cool and scented with the spice of a city she did not know.

Wind blew between the skyscrapers.

The sidewalks were empty.

The streets were empty.

It felt strange to be out here alone, no sound but her footsteps on the pavement. Impossible that her father's funeral had happened today. She wondered if there were people still at her house comforting her mother and brother, or if they had all gone home.

The glow of a payphone caught her attention on the other side of the street.

She ran across to it and dug some change out of her wallet, dialed the number.

Her mother answered on the fifth ring in a tired voice gone hoarse from crying.

"Hello?"

Lucy said nothing, just listening, her eyes filling up.

"Hello? Lucy, is that you?"

"Hey, Mom."

"Oh my God, where are you? Are you okay?"

"I just wanted to tell you something." She was beginning to tremble.

"What, honey? What?"

Lucy shouted into the phone, "He loved me, you stupid bitch! He loved me! I wish you had died! He's the only thing I ever fucking loved!"

She slammed the phone down on the hook and screamed inside the booth until her throat burned.

She'd left her mother's car in the only parking space she could find—a three-hour meter four blocks from the hotel that had long since expired. There were five orange envelopes under the windshield wipers, and the right front tire had been booted.

She unlocked the car and dragged the guitar case out of the backseat, started back to the hotel.

The keycard worked on the second try, and she slipped into her room and locked the door after her. Stowed Mark's suitcase, his shoes, his wallet, and his sports jacket in the closet.

She'd left home in a hurry, jamming her favorite books, clothes, and a few toiletries into the first thing to cross her path—her brother's guitar case. Now she flipped open the clasps, opened it on the bed, and dumped everything out. Set to work choosing outfits for the convention and smoothing out the wrinkles.

Before bed, she went back into the bathroom, sat on the toilet seat just watching Mark lying motionless in the shower. She got down on her knees and stroked his hair, caressed her finger through the gash in his throat.

By four a.m., she was in bed in her nightgown, and already dreaming of what tomorrow might bring.

The hotel was crawling with people in the morning and Lucy had to wait five minutes to catch an elevator down to the lobby. She picked up her name badge and book bag from registration, bought a latte, and headed off to the first panel of the morning.

"Walking on the Dark Side: What Makes a Bad Guy Bad?" featured five mystery writers, only one of whom she'd heard of. But they were all entertaining. After the panel and with Mark's money, she bought each of their books from a cranky Milwaukee bookseller named Katz.

Walking through the book room, where vendors had many of the participating writers' books for sale, she couldn't get over the thrill of being around so many people who loved to read. She never saw anyone reading in school. At least not for fun. And the few times she'd sat in the common area by herself with a book, she'd been bullied and mocked. The downside was that most of the people here were as old as her grandfather and many of them looked just as mean.

She took a table in a café downstairs and studied the schedule of events once more, looking for two panels to attend in the afternoon, though nothing caught her interest. Things didn't really get interesting until the star of the whole show arrived: the thriller/horror writer, Andrew Z. Thomas, was going to be interviewed in the main ballroom tomorrow at 11:00 a.m., with a signing to follow. She'd brought every one of his books with her to be autographed.

She sat in the lobby all afternoon, her attention divided between Mark's book, which she was really enjoying, and wanting to be with Mark in the shower again, and watching for Andrew Thomas, figuring if he was here, he'd have to walk past her at some point.

After the last panel of the day let out, the hotel emptied for an hour, and then slowly refilled again, everyone dressed to the nines now, lots of sports jackets and evening dresses, the book bags exchanged for stylish handbags.

She'd been sitting in the same chair for almost four hours, and her legs felt wobbly and faint when she finally stood.

The hotel bar was packed. All the writers seemed to be there.

She strolled over and wandered through the bar which was becoming more crowded by the minute, searching the faces for Andrew Thomas, but he wasn't there.

Back upstairs, she ordered room service. Stayed in watching television and eating a lavish meal on Darling's tab. A few minutes past midnight, she climbed out of bed and dressed and wandered down to the lobby.

The bar was even more crowded than before, and she scanned the faces in the smoky lowlight, eyes passing over countless groups that constantly shifted and changed, the occasional loner who spoke to no one, the softer, restrained groups huddled on the perimeter.

At the furthest corner of the bar, she finally spotted the man she'd come to meet, and her stomach fluttered.

He sat on a stool, surrounded by a dozen attentive, smiling faces, all listening as he told some story whose words she couldn't begin to pick out from the impressive noise of all those conversations.

She stumbled forward into the outskirts of the crowd, then elbowed and squeezed her way through the heart of it, until she stood just outside the group of people orbiting Andrew Thomas.

His face was fuller than the author photograph on his latest book jacket, and he had a few days' stubble shadowing his face, but he was undeniably...Andrew.

She'd never heard his voice, and it didn't sound anything like she imagined. He was more soft-spoken, and he had an accent. A southern accent. He was talking to a man seated to the right of him, but there were countless people eavesdropping.

“...so they show me the mock-up for the book cover, and I say, ‘Guys, I know you’ve been really working on this thing, and I appreciate that, but you’ve just put a penis on the cover of my book.’”

The hovering crowd broke into laughter.

“They said, ‘It’s not a penis, Andy, it’s a minaret.’ I said, ‘It’s flesh colored, it has a shaft, and a bulbous head that appears to be ejaculating the title of my book! Could I please have a new fucking cover without a cock on it?’”

While everyone laughed, Andrew tossed back a shot of something.

The man standing behind him said, “Another shot, Andrew?”

“I buy you shots, Billy. Everyone in for a shot of tequila? Bartender! We need...” Andy counted the people around him. “...thirteen shots of Patron Silver.”

Lucy stood watching him, mesmerized, trying to wrap her brain around the idea that the man whose words and stories she’d fallen in love with at twelve was sitting ten feet away from her, under the same roof, breathing the same air. She’d suspected it before, but last night with Mark Darling confirmed it: Andrew could read her thoughts. She knew he must have killed before because the way he described what it felt like for the killers in his books had been her experience exactly. She wanted to be closer to him, but his crowd had effectively cloistered him off from the rest of the bar.

Something was coming apart inside of her, this dark, mad need to connect with him, and for a moment the sound of the crowd dropped away. She stared at him, willing his eyes to meet hers, willing them to give her just a single slash of attention as the bartender lined up thirteen shotglasses and began to fill them from two bottles of Patron.

Andrew never looked at her. She watched the bartender bring the tray of shots, watched Andrew pass them around, heard the shotglasses clinking, heard the “cheers.”

And she was crying, invisible again.

She pushed her way back through the crowd into the lobby, moving quickly toward the elevators at the other end and telling herself there was still tomorrow. Andrew’s book signing. Anything could happen.

When she walked into her hotel room, she stopped, lingering for a moment in the doorway, wondering if by some chance her room service food could have spoiled so quickly. No. It wasn’t that. Of course.

She opened the bathroom and the waft hit her. Mark did not smell so pretty anymore.

She grabbed a towel off the rack and closed the door and tucked it against the crack between the door and the carpet. Lucy walked to the bed, kicked off her Chuck T's, and crawled under the covers. She hit the light. Closed her eyes. Opened them. The stink was still there. Potent and getting stronger every second. She turned on the light and sat up against the headboard. This was bad. First of all, because she couldn't sleep with the smell, and it would only get worse. But more importantly, when she brought Andrew Thomas up here tomorrow, the smell would totally gross him out, make a bad impression.

She hopped out of bed and walked into the bathroom. Opened one of the mini-bottles of shampoo and squirted the entire thing over Mark, who now looked purple and swollen. She cranked up the shower. As the hot water beat down on the corpse, she saw that it was leaking, and the heat only made the smell more intense.

She turned off the shower, grabbed the trashbag out of the waste basket beside the sink, and headed for the door.

Her bare feet tracked down the carpet toward the alcove where the vending machines hummed. Down in the lobby, a hundred and fifty feet below, she could hear Irish drinking songs lilting up out of the bar.

She held the plastic bag open while cubes of ice rattled down out of the ice machine. Carried it back to 1428 and into the bathroom, where she plugged the shower drain and dumped the ice over Mark Darling. Her heart sank. The bag of ice had barely covered him. She was going to need a lot more.

After five trips, the ice was beginning to look substantial piled on top of the dead writer's chest.

After ten, she stepped into the shower and spread them around, felt a glimmer of relief as they nearly covered him. One more trip, maybe two, and she'd be done.

Lucy reached down and grabbed the bag off the floor.

As she started toward the bathroom door, it swung open.

She froze.

A man stood in the threshold, and for a fleeting second, she thought it was Andrew Thomas, but he was wearing different clothes—a white tee-

shirt and blue jeans. And his hair was messy, eyes still squinting like he'd just woken up.

He was staring at the blood spatters on the bathroom floor, and at the trash bag in Lucy's hand, and now at Lucy.

It seemed like an entire minute passed without either of them speaking, Lucy thinking about the straight razor in the bedside table drawer. Useless now. Her eyes moved around the bathroom, looking for something with heft, or with an edge.

It surprised her when the man smiled. He said, "Who you got in there?"

She didn't answer. She made fists to stop her hands from shaking but all it did was give her shaking fists.

"Quite a mess," he said. "You've been a naughty little girl, haven't you?"

He took a step forward, glanced in the shower.

Lucy's eyes welled up. A sob escaped.

"No," the man said. "No, no, no. Don't cry."

He knelt down in front of Lucy.

The eyes. She was going to have to blind him. Jam her thumbs in as far as they would go and run like hell.

"You don't have to be afraid. What's your name?"

"Lucy."

Her hands had been at her sides. Now, she slowly raised them.

"Lucy, did that man in the shower hurt you?"

She nodded.

"What did he do?"

"He tried to rape me."

She shot her thumbs at his eyes, but he parried right and jumped back, laughing. Lucy ran for the open door. The man grabbed her and pulled her into his chest.

"Shhh," he whispered as she struggled. "Don't scream, Lucy."

She kicked her legs and tried to head-butt him as he carried her out of the bathroom into the hotel room and threw her onto the bed.

"Relax!" he said. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not going to get you in trouble."

Lucy glared at him.

"You should be more careful, you know. Ten trips with an ice bucket in the middle of the night is bound to get somebody's attention. Particularly if

their room is next to the ice machine.”

“Mark was starting to smell.”

“Yeah, I noticed. But a few cubes of ice isn’t going to fix it. You here by yourself?”

She nodded.

“He didn’t try to rape you, did he?”

She just watched him, said nothing.

“That’s a nice piece of work in there,” he said. “That man must be double your weight, at least. How’d you pull it off?”

“I want you to leave.”

“Why?”

“Go!”

“Lucy, please. I know you don’t know me, but you can trust me.”

She stuck her chin out and fought back the tremor in her bottom lip.

“How’d you overpower that man?” he asked again.

“Straight razor.” She said it proudly.

“He flailed around a bunch, didn’t he?”

Lucy couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah. It was funny. But loud and messy, too.”

The man eased down onto the edge of the bed. “Why’d you kill him?”

“They wouldn’t give me a room. I drove six hundred miles to come to this conference, and then they wouldn’t even give me a room.”

“Cause of your age.”

“Yeah.”

“You ever done anything like this before, Lucy?”

She shook her head. “But I thought about it a lot.”

“Wait. This was your first time?” She nodded. The man got a big grin on his face. “Well, how was it for you?”

“Amazing.”

“Yeah?”

“The blood was beautiful. So warm. I took my clothes off and rolled around in it.”

The man’s eyes sparkled. “I remember mine like it was yesterday. I’d give anything to go back and do it again for the first time.” He reached his hand out. “I’m Orson.”

She shook it.

He looked around the room. “So our friend in the shower. Who is he?”

“A writer.”

“Oh, shit. What’s his name?”

“Mark Darling.”

“Never heard of him.”

She pointed to the box of books. “Those are his books over there.”

Orson went over to the box and lifted a book, flipped through it, glanced at the back. “This is his first novel. That’s good.”

“Why?”

“No one here probably knows who he is, so he won’t be missed. Come on, where’s your stuff?”

“Over there. Why?”

“Pack it up. You’re coming with me.”

“No.”

“You can’t stay in here, Lucy.”

“I’m not leaving with you.”

“Listen. Did you have fun cutting Mark’s throat, rolling around in his blood?”

“Yeah.”

“You want to have the opportunity to do it again?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you better listen to me. If you get caught in this hotel room with that dead man, they’re going to lock you up.”

“But I’m not even eighteen.”

Orson walked over to the side of the bed and sat down next to Lucy. “Look at me.” She stared up at him. “I’ve been doing this a lot longer than you. If you were smart, you’d do what I say, maybe even learn a little something.”

“How many people have you killed?”

“Enough to know we need to get out of this room right now.”

She followed Orson down the hallway to the first room past the ice machine.

“It’s a two-room suite,” he said as he opened the door and let her in. “My friend’s next door sleeping, so let’s not disturb him. I think this sofa folds out into a bed.”

She dropped her guitar case on the floor and helped Orson unfold the sofa sleeper. Orson swiped a blanket from his bed and tossed it to Lucy.

“Now I have to be honest,” he said. “I’m a little worried you might want to cut my throat while I’m sleeping.”

“I won’t,” she said.

“Why don’t you give me your straight razor just to be on the safe side.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I don’t know you, Lucy.”

She lay awake for a long time thinking how tomorrow was the last day of the conference, and in some ways, the first day of the rest of her life. She wasn’t going home. She knew that. After Darling, how could she go back to geometry and biology and being a teenage girl in a suburban home? She could feel this stunning blackness flooding into her. It was filling her up so fast she could barely sleep, barely keep her eyes closed. She needed to see more blood. And soon.

She never slept. When the light began to push through the curtains, she sat up on the sofa and looked over at Orson on the bed, watching the man’s chest rise and fall, thinking how he’d been smart to take the razor from her. Nothing would’ve made her happier than to slide the blade across his neck, maybe even taste his blood, let it run down her throat. She should’ve tasted Darling’s. She imagined it would be so rich and even better than the wine her mother sometimes let her sip. Oh, well. Next time.

She rode down in the elevator with Orson and his friend, Luther, a tall, pale-faced man with long, black hair who was seriously creeping her out. He kept watching her with his big black eyes that held such an intensity she wasn’t sure she ever wanted to see them alone.

They ate breakfast downstairs, the three of them sitting at a table in a corner, and the fourth time she caught him staring at her, Lucy couldn’t help herself.

“Take a picture, dude. It’ll last longer.”

Orson looked up from his bacon and eggs. “What’s wrong?”

“Why does your friend keep staring at me like that? It’s weird.”

Orson grinned and glanced at Luther, then back at Lucy. He leaned toward her and whispered. “He wants to kill you, Lucy.”

She felt a coldness spill inside her gut.

“Why?”

“It’s what he does. He can’t help himself. He’s sitting there imagining draining you in our bathtub. But don’t worry. I’ve told him you’re off-limits. Told him you might even be one of us.”

She glared at Luther. “You don’t scare me.”

He said. “You look like you’re scared, little girl.”

“Oh, you can read my thoughts? Well, if you could, you’d know I’m thinking how pretty your dark blood would look running out of your snow-white neck.”

Orson laughed out loud. “Isn’t she great?”

Lucy hadn’t averted her eyes from Luther, soaking in the psychotic malevolence.

“All right, listen,” Orson said. “I think we’re all a little hard-up for some fun. I had an idea while I was falling asleep last night. Darling’s room is already a wreck. Why don’t we all, *together*, find someone to take there this afternoon?”

Lucy’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Yeah, we’ll go right after Andrew Thomas’s speech.” Orson smiled. “I wouldn’t want to miss that.” He looked at Luther. “What do you think? You brought your toolbox, right?”

Luther smiled, and it was the scariest thing Lucy had ever seen.

For some reason, Orson didn’t want to sit on the front row for Andrew Thomas’s speech, so Lucy sat by herself, her heart pumping as the man walked up onto the stage.

She stood with the rest of the crowd and applauded the guest of honor, then sat with rapt attention as Andrew read an excerpt from a work in progress, one of the most gruesome and awesome things Lucy had ever heard.

The book was called *The Passenger*, a horror novel about an unnamed, psychopathic hitchhiker who travels around the country getting free rides from people, then robbing and killing them most horribly. In the section Andrew read, the Passenger ties a man to the back of his own car and drags him down the highway for five miles.

The signing line stretched all the way around the bookroom. The eight books in Lucy’s arms were heavy, and by the time she got close to the table, her muscles were beginning to cramp.

She couldn't take her eyes off of Andrew as he signed books and made small talk with the fans. When it was finally her turn, she set her stack of books on the table and smiled and reached out her hand.

"Mr. Thomas, I am your biggest fan. I've read everything you ever wrote. I'm Lucy. I love what you read today. Will you sign my books?"

He shook her hand and smiled. "Of course."

"Um, I'm sorry, Mr. Thomas can only sign three books." Lucy looked at the woman standing behind the writer, a large woman in a horrific dress who looked like a librarian.

"But I want all of them signed."

The woman pursed her lips. "If everyone brought eight books, we'd be here until Christmas."

"But everyone didn't bring eight books. Most only brought one."

"Pick three. You're holding up the line."

Lucy glanced down at Andrew, flashed her puppy dog eyes.

"Margie, I think it's okay to make one exception," he said, grabbing the top book on Lucy's pile and opening it to the cover page. As he looked down to sign, Lucy stuck her tongue out at Margie.

"So are you in high school, Lucy?" he asked as he went through the books.

"I'm in 10th grade."

"Excellent. I think you might be the youngest person here."

"When is *The Passenger* coming out?" she asked.

"Probably next year."

"I can't wait to read it." As he signed the last book, she said, "Look, would you maybe like to get a cup of coffee after this? I'd just love to talk with you a little more."

He smiled and pushed her stack of books toward her. "I'd love to Lucy, but I'm actually flying back to North Carolina in about two hours."

"Oh."

"It was great to meet you."

Lucy lifted her stack of books and headed out of the book room. She might have cried if she didn't have something else to look forward to.

"What about her?" Lucy said.

"No, I know who that is," Orson said. "She's a pretty well-known cozy writer. She'd never go for it."

Lucy was sitting between Orson and Luther on a sofa at the edge of the hotel bar, the conference booklet open across her lap. Every writer in attendance was pictured in the booklet, along with a brief bio. It made the hunting so much easier.

"I see a possibility," Luther said.

"Where?"

"Guy standing alone at the corner of the bar, looking around, talking to nobody."

"Gotcha. Can you read his nametag?"

"No. Too far." Luther stood up and pushed his way through the crowd, passing within several feet of the mark. He circled back around and sat down on the couch again, said, "Richard Bryson."

Lucy flipped through the booklet and found the man's picture and bio. She read it aloud: "Richard Bryson is not only the author of *Against the Law*, a thriller about a corrupt police force, but the publisher as well. He is currently working on a new book."

"Perfect," Orson said. "Luther, head on up. We'll be there in ten."

Orson sat with Lucy after Luther had left, watching Bryson drink his beer alone.

"All right, Lucy, tell me how you'd get this man we've never met up to our hotel room."

"Um, I'd tell him we have a party going on and invite him to come."

"Okay. If some person you'd never met invited you up to their hotel room, would you go?"

"I don't know."

"The answer is no. You wouldn't. Listen, look at me. You're small and young, you have no physical strength, so if you want to do this, over and over and over again, without getting caught or killed, you have to be smart."

She rolled her eyes. He was sounding a little like her mother.

"Oh, am I boring you? Get the fuck out of here then, you little brat."

"You're not. I'm sorry."

"I'm trying to help you. So tell me. How would you get Bryson up to our hotel room?"

"I don't know."

"You ready to learn something?"

“Yes.”

“Vanity. Know what that is?”

She nodded. “When you’re in love with yourself.”

“Exactly. We’re all in love with ourselves. It’s our weakness. Our main failing. If you can play on that, if you can appeal to someone’s vanity without them knowing you’re doing it, you can get them to do anything you want.”

“I don’t understand.”

Orson stood up. “Follow me. Keep your mouth shut. And watch and learn.”

She followed Orson through the throng of people, stood behind him as he leaned his elbows on the bar and waited for the bartender to notice him.

After a minute, Orson began to look around, and when his eyes fell upon Richard Bryson standing right beside him, Lucy saw a huge smile break across Orson’s face.

He said, “Oh my God, you’re Richard Bryson!”

As the man glanced over at Orson, Lucy got her first decent look at him. He seemed old as shit to her, at least fifty. His coarse blond hair was long and wavy and on the verge of turning gray, and he had what she thought was a gross mustache.

The man gave a skeptical smile that belied insecurity and said, “Um, yeah, who are you?”

“Well, for starters, I’m a huge fan of *Against the Law*. I thought it was the best book I’ve read this year.”

“Oh, well thank you. You know, I just made it available as an ebook.”

“A what?”

“An electronic book. I put it up on my website as a free download.”

“Oh, neat.”

Oh stupid, Lucy thought. *Like people would ever want to read books on an electronic screen.*

“Ebooks are going to be the future of publishing. I’m sure of it.”

“Are you working on a new book?” Orson asked.

“Yeah, I am actually.” Orson was right. Lucy saw Bryson beginning to come alive as he talked about himself.

“Can you tell me anything about it?” Orson asked.

“Well, it’s a sequel to *Against the Law*.”

“Oh, fantastic.”

“You know how Rodriguez died at the end?”

“Yeah, sure. That was so heartbreaking.”

“Well, he’s not really dead.”

“No kidding?”

“And he’s back and pissed off and looking for revenge.”

“I can’t wait to read it. Look, Mr. Bryson—”

“Please, Richard.”

“Richard, my name’s Vincent Carmichael, and I’m a freelance reviewer. I do stuff for Kirkus, Booklist, Publishers Weekly. I would love to do an interview with you and pitch it to PW or Kirkus. I think they’d be all over it.”

“That’d be great.”

“Do you have some time right now?”

“Um, sure.”

“What do you say we go up to my room? My recorder is up there and we can see what happens. By the way, this is my niece, Michelle.”

“Hi, Michelle.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Bryson,” Lucy said.

Bryson pulled out his wallet. “Let me just pay for my beer.”

“Get out of here.” Orson pulled a five dollar bill from his pocket and tossed it on the bar. “It is so good to finally meet you, Rich.”

He patted the man on the shoulder and pulled him away from the bar.

As they rode up in the elevator, Lucy marveled at the persona Orson had adopted: an attentive, personable book reviewer who was utterly fascinated with the life and work of Richard Bryson. She didn’t know how he controlled himself, because as the doors opened and they walked off the car onto the fourteenth floor, her body was beginning to buzz with anticipation.

At last, they reached the door to 1428, and Lucy pulled the keycard out of her pocket, her hands trembling.

She swiped the card as Bryson said, “You should ask me about my publishing company, too. I hate the big New York publishers, so I’ve decided to...” He stopped talking as Lucy pushed the door open, and she knew exactly why. A subdued but foul odor seeped out of the room into the hallway.

“After you, Rich,” Orson said. He was glancing up and down the hallway, which for the moment, was empty.

Bryson hesitantly entered the hotel room and Lucy and Orson followed after him. Lucy heard the subtle click of Orson locking the door.

“My goodness,” Bryson said. “Smells like something died in here.”

“You can smell that?” Orson said. They had all passed the closed bathroom door and now stood in the dark bedroom. “It must be that sandwich half I threw away last night. It sure went bad quickly.”

Bryson took off his sports jacket. “Do you mind if I use your restroom before we get started? That beer is moving right through me.”

“Of course. Right through that door.”

Lucy stood next to Orson, watching Bryson disappear into the bathroom.

“Where’s Luther?” she asked.

“About to have some Luther fun.”

She could see the light come on under the door, the sounds of Bryson shuffling around inside.

“Orson?”

“Shhh,” he whispered. “Let’s just enjoy this moment together.”

Bryson said, “Oh God!”

Something crashed to the floor, and through the door came the sound of a desperate struggle, something banging into cabinets and walls, and then the meaty thud of hard punches.

Bryson went quiet, but there was still movement inside the bathroom. After a minute, the door opened, and Luther walked out smiling.

“Come see,” he said.

Lucy hurried over to the open door.

Bryson lay unconscious on the floor, hog-tied with zip-ties, and a ball-gag in his mouth.

“Nice work, Luther,” she said.

“You should’ve seen his face. He sat down on the toilet to take a dump, and just as he was starting to notice all the blood, I swept the shower curtain back and had Mark Darling waving to him. Good thing he was on the toilet, ’cause he shit.”

“Can I have my straight razor back?” Lucy said.

Orson glanced down at her. “Of course. But you know we aren’t just going to kill him right away.”

“Why not?”

He smiled. “Sweet, Lucy. So much to learn.”

Richard opened his eyes fifteen minutes later, naked and shivering. The balls of his feet just barely touched the dead man sprawled beneath him across the shower tile. His wrists were stretched far above his head, the zip-tie between them hanging from an anchor bolt that had been screwed into the ceiling. A giant ball had been wedged into his mouth.

Orson sat across from him on the toilet. Lucy stood beside him, and Luther sat on the surface of the sink.

“I just want to thank you again, Richard, for taking the time out of your busy schedule to sit for this interview.” Orson smiled and looked at Luther. “I think we should let Lucy go first. Okay with you?”

“As long as we get to stay in here and watch. Lucy?”

“What?”

Luther patted a red Craftsman toolbox. “I know you have a straight razor, but if you’d like to borrow anything in here, you’re welcome to it.”

“Look at you,” Orson said. “Sharing.”

Lucy saw Richard’s eyes bug out when Luther opened the box. Hers did too. “What in the world?”

“I collect ancient surgical tools.”

She lifted out a long cylinder with six tiny blades at the end. “What is this?”

“It’s called an artificial leech. It tears a superficial wound in the skin and creates a vacuum to suck up the blood.”

“It looks fun.”

“Oh, it is.”

She set it on the countertop and pulled out another tool. Richard’s bladder let loose.

“That’s in my top three,” Luther said. The metal of the instrument was dark brown with rust and looked to be several hundred years old. It had handles at the end, that when pulled apart, made the other end open wide. “It’s called a cervical dilator,” Luther said, “but it works beautifully on gentlemen as well. It fell out of use, because it typically just tore the insides apart, as you’ll see.”

She pulled out a strange-looking knife.

“For circumcisions.”

What looked like a pair of pliers, but instead of metal grippers, had a needle at the end.

“That’s called a hernia tool. I know it looks cool, but it’s kind of hard to use. Here, let me show you my favorite.” Luther reached into the toolbox and withdrew a long metal tool with a gently curving shaft. “This is called a lithotome. Shaft goes up the anus and then you squeeze the handle and a blade comes out on a spring release.”

“What was it used for?”

“To cut the bladder to release kidney stones.”

“Oh, this looks wicked.” She pulled out a hollow metal cylinder with circular blades at one end.”

“That’s a scarificator. Used for bloodletting.” He grabbed another tool. “This is a tonsil guillotine.” And another. “This is a trephine for skull drilling. Here’s a vaginal speculum, and these are hemorrhoid forceps.”

The toolbox was empty now, a veritable horrowshow on display on the bathroom sink.

“I dream of coming back as a Victorian doctor,” Luther said.

Orson laughed.

“Decisions, decisions,” Lucy said, reaching for the lithotome.

“It’s sad how he keep passing out,” Lucy said.

Luther was holding a bottle of smelling salts under Bryson’s nose.

“Yeah, you’ve got to be careful,” Orson said. “The biggest buzz-kill is when they lose too much blood. They just go into shock and die, and that’s it. Superficial cuts are key.”

Richard jerked back into consciousness and started to scream again through the ball-gag.

“These aren’t ideal conditions,” Orson said. “Of course, no matter what, we can’t take the ball-gag out of his mouth. What I’m afraid is going to happen is he’s going to throw up and choke to death.”

“I wish I could hear him scream.”

“Me, too. It adds so much more.”

Six hours later, they washed Luther’s surgical tools, left the remains of Bryson hanging in the shower, and walked out of 1428 for the last time.

It was almost nine o’clock and many of the conference attendees had already left, the lobby much quieter now.

Orson bought Luther and Lucy dinner in the restaurant downstairs, everyone happy for the moment, a quiet contentment settling over the meal.

"When do you guys leave?" Lucy asked.

"First thing tomorrow."

"Can I come with you?"

"No."

Lucy felt a lump swelling in her throat. "Don't you like me?"

"Of course," Orson said. "But I can't take you with me, I'm sorry."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"That's for you to figure out. Are you going home?"

"No. And my car's booted. I only have a hundred and fifty dollars and my guitar case."

Orson reached into his pocket, opened his wallet, pulled out a roll of bills. "Here," he said. "This should get you started."

Lucy thumbed through the money. Almost five hundred dollars.

"Thank you," she said, but the sadness was still there. "How am I supposed to get anywhere? I don't have a car."

"You could hitchhike," Luther said.

"That's dangerous."

"You'll have to be careful," Orson said. "Although, I have a feeling, it's the poor people who pick you up that we should be more concerned for."

Luther laughed. "You need to get your hands on some painkillers. Oxycodone. Something hard-hitting that you can drug people with. That's the only way you'll be able to overpower someone bigger than yourself. And let's face it. Everyone's bigger than you."

"Seriously." Orson reached across the table and touched Lucy's hand. "You have to be careful. You have to learn to read people. One day, you're going to meet someone out there like me and Luther, only they may not be so hot to take you under their wing. They might rather hang you up in a shower."

"I'll be careful."

"How?"

"I won't trust anybody."

"Good."

Lucy squeezed his hand. "Thank you, Orson," she said. "I'm glad I met you. You too, Luther."

Luther smiled. It was still scary, but for the first time, he didn't look like he was thinking about killing her.

They walked Lucy through the lobby and out the revolving doors of the hotel. Bellhops were stacking suitcases on luggage carts and hailing cabs.

"You could stay one more night," Orson said.

"Thanks, but I'm ready to go." She wrapped her arms around Orson and squeezed him. "I'll never forget you."

He knelt down in front of her. "You're a special girl, Lucy. You know what you are, and you're not afraid of it, and I admire that. I admire the hell out of it."

She turned to Luther and shook his hand, then lifted her guitar case and walked away from the hotel, out onto the sidewalk into the night.

Lucy had walked ten blocks before the first pair of headlights appeared in the distance.

She dropped her guitar case on the pavement, a small pit of nerves tightening in her stomach.

The car was getting closer.

She could hear its engine, and for the first time in her life, but certainly not the last, she stuck out her thumb.

A minivan pulled over to the curb and the front passenger window rolled down, a thirty-something woman smiling under the dome light.

"You need a ride, sweetie?" she asked.

Lucy conjured up a smile. "If it's not too much trouble. It's really cold out here."

"I've got groceries in the front seat, but you're welcome to climb in the back."

Lucy pulled open the side door and stepped into the minivan, stowing her guitar case on the floor and sitting down beside a car seat, where an infant slept.

The woman looked back between the seats at Lucy.

"Just try to keep it down, if you don't mind," she said quietly. "As you can see, my little angel is sleeping."

"No problem," Lucy whispered, staring down at the baby, thinking, *No Luther, not everyone's bigger than me.*

For the continuing adventures of Lucy, read *Serial* and *Serial Uncut*, by Blake Crouch, Jack Kilborn, and J.A. Konrath.

For the continuing adventures of Orson and Luther, read *Desert Places* and *Locked Doors* by Blake Crouch.

Read on for an interview with Blake Crouch, plus excerpts from all four of his books, *Desert Places*, *Locked Doors*, *Abandon*, and *Snowbound*...

An Interview with Blake Crouch by Hank Wagner
Originally Published in Crimespree, July 2009

According to his website, Blake Crouch grew up in Statesville, a small town in the piedmont of North Carolina. He graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2000, where he studied literature and creative writing. He currently resides in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado. Crouch's first book, *Desert Places*, was published in 2003. Pat Conroy called it "Harrowing, terrific, a whacked-out combination of Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy." Val McDermid described it as "An ingenious, diabolical debut that calls into question all our easy moral assumptions. *Desert Places* is a genuine thriller that pulses with adrenaline from start to finish." His second novel, *Locked Doors*, was published in July 2005. A sequel to *Desert Places*, it created a similar buzz. His third novel, *Abandon*, was published on July 7, 2009.

HANK WAGNER: Your writing career began in college?

BLAKE CROUCH: I started writing seriously in college. I had tinkered before, but the summer after my freshman year, I decided that I wanted to try to make a living at being a writer. Spring semester of 1999, I was in an intro creative writing class and I wrote the short story (called "Ginsu Tony") that would grow into *Desert Places*. Once I started my first novel, it became an obsession.

HW: Where did the original premise for *Desert Places* come from?

BC: The idea for *Desert Places* arose when two ideas crossed. I had the opening chapter already in my head... suspense writer receives an anonymous letter telling him there's a body buried on his property, covered in his blood. I didn't know where my protagonist was going to be taken though. Around the same time, I happened to be glancing through a scrapbook that had photographs of this backpacking trip I took in Wyoming in the mid 90's. One of those photographs was of a road running off into the horizon in the midst of a vast desert. My brain starting working. What if my protagonist is taken to a cabin out in the middle of nowhere, by a

psychopath? What if this cabin is in this vast desert, and he has no hope of escape? That photograph broke the whole story open for me.

HW: Why a sequel for your second book? Affection for the characters?

BC: It was actually my editor's idea. I was perfectly happy walking away from the first book. But once she mentioned it during the editing of *Desert Places*, I really started to think about where the story could go, wondered how Andy might have changed after seven years in hiding, and I got excited about doing it. And I'm very glad I did, because I would've missed those characters. Even my psychopaths are family in some strange, twisted way.

HW: Of all the reviews and comments about your books, what was the strangest? The meanest? The nicest? The most perceptive?

BC: The strangest: This was a comment about me and the reviewer wrote something to the effect that I was either a super-talented writer with an immense imagination or one sick puppy. I think that's open to debate. The meanest: From those [expletive deleted] at Kirkus. Now, keep in mind, this is my first taste of reviews and the reviewer absolutely savaged my book. It was so mean it was funny... although I didn't see the humor for some time. The review ended, "Sadly, a sequel is in the works." The nicest: That's hard to choose from. I particularly loved the review for *Locked Doors* that appeared in the *Winston-Salem Journal*. The reviewer wrote, and this is my favorite quote thus far, "If you don't think you'll enjoy seeing how Crouch makes the torture and disembowelment of innocent women, children and even lax store employees into a thing of poetic beauty, maybe you should go watch Sponge Bob." The most perceptive: The reviews that recognize that I'm trying to make a serious exploration of the human psyche, the nature of evil, and man's depravity are the ones that please me the most.

HW: Do you strive for realism in your writing, or do you try more to entertain?

BC: First and foremost, I want to entertain. I want the reader to close the book thinking, "that was a helluva story." Beyond that, I do strive for realism. I want the reader to identify with my characters' emotions, whether

it's fear, sadness, or happiness. The places I write about, from the Yukon to the Outer Banks to the Colorado mountains are rendered accurately, and that's very important to me, because I want the reader to have the benefit of visiting these beautiful places in my books.

HW: The villain in *Locked Doors* seems almost a force of nature, cunning, instinctively brilliant when it comes to creating mayhem. Do you worry that readers might write him off as unrealistic?

BC: I decided to approach Luther Kite a little differently than my bad guy, Orson Thomas, in *Desert Places*. In the first book, I tried to humanize Orson, to gin up sympathy by explaining what happened in his childhood to turn him into this monster. With Luther et al., I made a conscious decision not to delve into any of that, and for this reason I think he comes off as almost mythic, larger than life, maybe with even a tinge of the supernatural. I don't worry that readers will find him unrealistic, because I didn't try to make him like your typical realistic humdrum villain. What I want is for readers to fear him.

HW: What's the most important thing a book has to do to keep YOUR attention?

BC: It's actually very simple... a great story told through great writing. I don't care if it's western, horror, thriller, historical, romance, or literary. I just want to know that I'm in the hands of someone who knows what they're doing.

HW: Who are your literary heroes?

BC: I grew up on southern writers -- Walker Percy, Pat Conroy -- the fantasy of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. In college I discovered Thomas Harris, Dennis Lehane, James Lee Burke, Caleb Carr, and my favorite writer, Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy just blows me away. His prose is so rich. He is unlike anyone else out there today. His 1985 novel, *Blood Meridian*, in my opinion, is the greatest horror novel ever written.

HW: What makes *Blood Meridian* "the greatest horror novel ever written?"

BC: The writing is mind blowing. The violence (which occurs frequently and in vivid detail) rises to the level of poetry in McCarthy's hands. And the story is fascinating. It's based on historical fact and follows a bloodthirsty gang through the Mexico-Texas Borderlands in the mid-1800's, who have been hired by the Mexican government to collect as many Indian scalps as they can. I read *Blood Meridian* every year.

HW: Reading *Desert Places* and *Locked Doors*, it seems that you're drawn to the horrific. The books are filled with horrific acts, and with terrifying set pieces, as in the descent into the Kites' basement in *Locked Doors*. Did the horror genre hold any attraction to you growing up?

BC: I honestly didn't read a lot of horror growing up, but I always loved the sensation of fear produced by a scary movie or a great book. Some of my first short fiction (written in middle school) could be classified as horror. In fact, there's a short story on my website called "In Shock" that I wrote in the 8th grade.

HW: Might there be a sequel to *Locked Doors* someday?

BC: Midway through the writing of *Locked Doors*, it occurred to me the story might be a trilogy. I may finish out the trilogy at some point. I'm starting to miss my characters (the ones that survived), and I have a feeling that I will return to the world of *Locked Doors* at some point in the future to check in on them. We'll have to see.

HW: Your latest novel, *Abandon*, is set in Colorado, where you've lived for the past six years. Did you intend to write a novel set in that state when you moved there, or did your surroundings inspire you to?

BC: This was definitely a case of my surroundings inspiring me. Two months after we moved from North Carolina to Durango, we had some friends come out to visit. My wife and I took them on a backpacking trip into the San Juans, and it was on this trip that I first saw the ruins of a mining town—Sneffels, Colorado and the Camp Bird Mine. It made a huge impression, the idea of living in these extreme conditions, particularly in

winter. The claustrophobia, the desperation, the kind of people who would subject themselves to such a life fascinated me.

HW: Did you have any particular goals in mind when you embarked on this project? Did they change as you worked? Do you think you met your goals?

BC: The idea of writing a “mining town thriller” was with me for a long time, as early as the summer of 2003, before *Desert Places* was published. Initially, I thought it would all be set in the past, a straight historical. Then in ‘05, while on tour for *Locked Doors*, I had a sudden realization that this was the story I needed to write, and that it wasn’t just historical. There would be present scenes, too, and the mystery at the heart of the book would be the mass disappearance of the town. My goal was to write a book that I would want to read, and in that regard, I think I succeeded.

HW: How long did it take to prepare to write the book? How much research was involved? Do you research first, then write, or answer the questions that arise as you dive into the writing?

BC: I started outlining in the fall of ‘05, and finalized the book with my editor in the summer ‘07. There were 7 drafts, and tons of research, which occurred at all stages of the writing.

HW: Was it tough striking a balance between writing a thriller and the urge to display all your newfound knowledge? Any fascinating tidbits that didn’t go into the book that you want to share with readers?

BC: Lots of stuff got cut, and some of it was wonderful (and it still pains me to have let it go) but in the end, it was all about what advanced the story. For instance, there was an Irishman who lived in one of the Colorado mining towns, and the love of his life had died on their wedding night some years prior. Every night, from his cabin above town, the sound of a violin would sweep down the mountain. Mournful, beautiful music. The town got used to hearing it. One night, after the violin went silent, a single gunshot echoed from the cabin. The townsfolk went up and found him dead, with a

note asking to be buried with his wife. I loved that bit, wanted to put this guy into the story, but it didn't belong, so I had to let it go.

HW: Your first two books followed the adventures of basically the same cast of characters. Was it a relief or was it scary to move on to a whole new set of players?

BC: Both a total relief and completely terrifying. But what's worse than the fear of doing something new and challenging is realizing one day that you're in a rut, that you've essentially written the same book again and again.

HW: Your first two books could be described as pure, relentless adrenaline. In fact, those are your words. Was it difficult to work on a novel taking place in two different times, switching back and forth between the two? How about working with a larger cast? Did that present you with any particular challenges, issues, problems?

BC: It was hard at first, but once I got into the flow of both narratives, it wasn't such a big deal to go back and forth, which is the way I wrote it. It sounds silly, but I wrote the present in one font, the past in another, and for some reason, changing fonts helped me to get back into whatever section I was working on. This cast of characters, which I knew was going to be big going in, was intimidating starting out. I spent a month on character studies, really getting to know each main character and their back-story before I dove into the book, and I think (I hope) that made all the difference.

HW: Has having children changed the way you look at your writing? Your subject matter? Do you ever pause and think, I guess my kids won't be able to read that until they're older?

BC: *Abandon* was the first thing I wrote after my son was born, and being a father for the first time and that new relationship and life-altering love couldn't help but find its way into this work. Parent-child relationships definitely constitute a significant aspect of *Abandon*. And yeah, there's no way my kids will be able to read my first two books until they're at least seven or eight (kidding).

HW: Who is your first reader?

BC: My wife.

HW: What's your favorite procrastination technique to avoid writing?

BC: Playing my acoustic guitar.

HW: Now that you're in the business, do you find as much time to read as before? Do you avoid fiction for fear of unconsciously copying someone's stories?

BC: I read more now than ever. You have to. I've never avoided fiction for fear of unconsciously copying someone else's stories. You can't help but be influenced by the work of others. No one is unique. As Cormac McCarthy said, "The sad truth is that books are made of other books."

HW: I happen to know you've written an essay about Jack Ketchum's Off Season for the upcoming International Thrillers Writers project *Thrillers: 100 Must Reads*. Was that format difficult for you? Did the experience provide you with any special insights into your own writings, or into thrillers in general?

BC: It was the hardest thing I'd written all year. I felt like I was in college again working on a term paper. That being said, it was a great joy to delve into the life and work of Jack Ketchum. I had great editors on that project. (HW: Full disclosure time: the editors for that worthy project are the esteemed David Morrell and yours truly. End of plug.)

HW: Tell us a little about future projects. You have a short story slated to appear in the ITW anthology, *Thrillers 2*?

BC: Yep, it's called "Remaking" and also happens to be set in a beautiful Colorado town called Ouray. It's premised on a question: What would you do if you were in a coffee shop, saw a man sitting with a young boy, and suspected the boy wasn't supposed to be with him, that maybe he'd been

kidnapped. I'm over the moon and humbled to be included in such a stellar collection of writers. Joe Konrath and I have just released a free short story as an eBook with the help of our publishers. It's kind of groundbreaking, both in how Joe and I collaborated, and how our publishers came together to make it available everywhere. It's called "Serial", and is probably the most twisted thing either of us have ever written. The *Abandon* audiobook will have a short story that I read called "On the Good, Red Road," and finally Jen Jordan's new anthology, *Uncage Me*, publishes in July, and I have a story in that one called "*69."

HW: Are you working on a new novel at the moment?

BC: I am.

HW: Where are you in that process?

BC: About a hundred pages in.

HW: Can you talk a little about the new book, or would that jinx things?

BC: I'm pretty sure I would deeply regret talking about it at this point. I find if I talk too much about works-in-progress, it takes the wind out of my sails.

HW: Any book recommendations?

BC: Joe Konrath just published a novel under the name Jack Kilborn. It's called *Afraid*, and I think it's one of the best pieces of horror fiction to come out in recent memory.

HW: Work uniform?

BC: A white tee-shirt and pajama bottoms with snowflakes on them. I know, it's awful.

HW: Misconceptions about people who graduated from UNC?

BC: That if by some rip in the space-time continuum, Al-Qaeda managed to get a Division I college basketball team together, and if that team somehow made it to the NCAA tournament, and then survived March Madness, and, now here's a real stretch, were facing Duke in the championship game on Monday night, that UNC fans would put aside their petty rivalry and root for Duke over the terrorists.

DESERT PLACES

Published in January 2004 by Thomas Dunne Books

DESCRIPTION: Andrew Z. Thomas is a successful writer of suspense thrillers, living the dream at his lake house in the piedmont of North Carolina. One afternoon in late spring, he receives a bizarre letter that eventually threatens his career, his sanity, and the lives of everyone he loves. A murderer is designing his future, and for the life of him, Andrew can't get away.

Harrowing...terrific...a whacked out combination of Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy.

PAT CONROY

[C]arried by rich, image-filled prose. Crouch will handcuff you, blindfold you, throw you in the trunk of a car, and drag you kicking and screaming through a story so intense, so emotionally packed, that you will walk away stunned.

WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

Excerpt from Desert Places...

On a lovely May evening, I sat on my deck, watching the sun descend upon Lake Norman. So far, it had been a perfect day. I'd risen at 5:00 a.m. as I always do, put on a pot of French roast, and prepared my usual breakfast of scrambled eggs and a bowl of fresh pineapple. By six o'clock, I was writing, and I didn't stop until noon. I fried two white crappies I'd caught the night before, and the moment I sat down for lunch, my agent called. Cynthia fields my messages when I'm close to finishing a book, and she had several for me, the only one of real importance being that the movie deal for my latest novel, *Blue Murder*, had closed. It was good news of course, but two other movies had been made from my books, so I was used to it by now.

I worked in my study for the remainder of the afternoon and quit at 6:30. My final edits of the new as yet untitled manuscript would be finished tomorrow. I was tired, but my new thriller, *The Scorcher*, would be on bookshelves within the week. I savored the exhaustion that followed a full

day of work. My hands sore from typing, eyes dry and strained, I shut down the computer and rolled back from the desk in my swivel chair.

I went outside and walked up the long gravel drive toward the mailbox. It was the first time I'd been out all day, and the sharp sunlight burned my eyes as it squeezed through the tall rows of loblollies that bordered both sides of the drive. It was so quiet here. Fifteen miles south, Charlotte was still gridlocked in rush-hour traffic, and I was grateful not to be a part of that madness. As the tiny rocks crunched beneath my feet, I pictured my best friend, Walter Lancing, fuming in his Cadillac. He'd be cursing the drone of horns and the profusion of taillights as he inched away from his suite in uptown Charlotte, leaving the quarterly nature magazine *Hiker* to return home to his wife and children. Not me, I thought, the solitary one.

For once, my mailbox wasn't overflowing. Two envelopes lay inside, one a bill, the other blank except for my address typed on the outside. Fan mail.

Back inside, I mixed myself a Jack Daniel's and Sun-Drop and took my mail and a book on criminal pathology out onto the deck. Settling into a rocking chair, I set everything but my drink on a small glass table and gazed down to the water. My backyard is narrow, and the woods flourish a quarter mile on either side, keeping my home of ten years in isolation from my closest neighbors. Spring had not come this year until mid-April, so the last of the pink and white dogwood blossoms still specked the variably green interior of the surrounding forest. Bright grass ran down to a weathered gray pier at the water's edge, where an ancient weeping willow sagged over the bank, the tips of its branches dabbling in the surface of the water.

The lake is more than a mile wide where it touches my property, making houses on the opposite shore visible only in winter, when the blanket of leaves has been stripped from the trees. So now, in the thick of spring, branches thriving with baby greens and yellows, the lake was mine alone, and I felt like the only living soul for miles around.

I put my glass down half-empty and opened the first envelope. As expected, I found a bill from the phone company, and I scrutinized the lengthy list of calls. When I'd finished, I set it down and lifted the lighter envelope. There was no stamp, which I thought strange, and upon slicing it open, I extracted a single piece of white paper and unfolded it. In the center of the page, one paragraph had been typed in black ink:

Greetings. There is a body buried on your property, covered in your blood. The unfortunate young lady's name is Rita Jones. You've seen this missing schoolteacher's face on the news, I'm sure. In her jeans pocket you'll find a slip of paper with a phone number on it. You have one day to call that number. If I have not heard from you by 8:00 p.m. tomorrow (5/17), the Charlotte Police Department will receive an anonymous phone call. I'll tell them where Rita Jones is buried on Andrew Thomas's lakefront property, how he killed her, and where the murder weapon can be found in his house. (I do believe a paring knife is missing from your kitchen.) I hope for your sake I don't have to make that call. I've placed a property marker on the grave site. Just walk along the shoreline toward the southern boundary of your property and you'll find it. I strongly advise against going to the police, as I am always watching you.

A smile edged across my lips. I even chuckled to myself. Because my novels treat crime and violence, my fans often have a demented sense of humor. I've received death threats, graphic artwork, even notes from people claiming to have murdered in the same fashion as the serial killers in my books. But I'll save this, I thought. I couldn't remember one so original.

I read it again, but a premonitory twinge struck me the second time, particularly because the author had some knowledge regarding the layout of my property. And a paring knife was, in fact, missing from my cutlery block. Carefully refolding the letter, I slipped it into the pocket of my khakis and walked down the steps toward the lake.

As the sun cascaded through the hazy sky, beams of light drained like spilled paint across the western horizon. Looking at the lacquered lake suffused with deep orange, garnet, and magenta, I stood by the shore for several moments, watching two sunsets collide.

Against my better judgment, I followed the shoreline south and was soon tramping through a noisy bed of leaves. I'd gone an eighth of a mile when I stopped. At my feet, amid a coppice of pink flowering mountain laurel, I saw a miniature red flag attached to a strip of rusted metal thrust into the ground. The flag fluttered in a breeze that curled off the water. This has to be a joke, I thought, and if so, it's a damn good one.

As I brushed away the dead leaves that surrounded the marker, my heart began to pound. The dirt beneath the flag was packed, not crumbly like undisturbed soil. I even saw half a footprint when I'd swept all the leaves away.

I ran back to the house and returned with a shovel. Because the soil had previously been unearthed, I dug easily through the first foot and a half, directly below where the marker had been placed. At two feet, the head of the shovel stabbed into something soft. My heart stopped. Throwing the shovel aside, I dropped to my hands and knees and clawed through the dirt. A rotten stench enveloped me, and as the hole deepened, the smell grew more pungent.

My fingers touched flesh. I drew my hand back in horror and scrambled away from the hole. Rising to my feet, I stared down at a coffee brown ankle, barely showing through the dirt. The odor of rot overwhelmed me, so I breathed only through my mouth as I took up the shovel again.

When the corpse was completely exposed, and I saw what a month of putrefaction could do to a human face, I vomited into the leaves. I kept thinking that I should have the stomach for this because I write about it. Researching the grisly handiwork of serial killers, I'd studied countless mutilated cadavers. But I had never smelled a human being decomposing in the ground, or seen how insects teem in the moist cavities.

I composed myself, held my hand over my mouth and nose, and peered again into the hole. The face was unrecognizable, but the body was undoubtedly that of a short black female, thick in the legs, plump through the torso. She wore a formerly white shirt, now marred with blood and dirt, the fabric rent over much of the chest, primarily in the vicinity of her heart. Jean shorts covered her legs down to the knees. I got back down on all fours, held my breath, and reached for one of her pockets. Her legs were mushy and turgid, and I had great difficulty forcing my hand into the tight jeans. Finding nothing in the first pocket, I stepped across the hole and tried the other. Sticking my hand inside it, I withdrew a slip of paper from a fortune cookie and fell back into the leaves, gasping for clean lungfuls of air. On one side, I saw the phone number; on the other: "you are the only flower of meditation in the wilderness."

In five minutes, I'd reburied the body and the marker. I took a small chunk of granite from the shore and placed it on the thicketed grave site.

Then I returned to the house. It was quarter to eight, and there was hardly any light left in the sky.

Two hours later, sitting on the sofa in my living room, I dialed the number on the slip of paper. Every door to the house was locked, most of the lights turned on, and in my lap, a cold satin stainless .357 revolver.

I had not called the police for a very good reason. The claim that it was my blood on the woman was probably a lie, but the paring knife had been missing from my kitchen for weeks. Also, with the Charlotte Police Department's search for Rita Jones dominating local news headlines, her body on my property, murdered with my knife, possibly with my fingerprints on it, would be more than sufficient evidence to indict me. I'd researched enough murder trials to know that.

As the phone rang, I stared up at the vaulted ceiling of my living room, glanced at the black baby grand piano I'd never learned to play, the marble fireplace, the odd artwork that adorned the walls. A woman named Karen, whom I'd dated for nearly two years, had convinced me to buy half a dozen pieces of art from a recently deceased minimalist from New York, a man who signed his work "Loman." I hadn't initially taken to Loman, but Karen had promised me I'd eventually "get" him. Now, \$27,000 and one fiancée lighter, I stared at the ten-by-twelve-foot abomination that hung above the mantel: shit brown on canvas, with a basketball-size yellow sphere in the upper right-hand corner. Aside from Brown No. 2, four similar marvels of artistic genius pockmarked other walls of my home, but these I could suffer. Mounted on the wall at the foot of the staircase, it was Playtime, the twelve-thousand-dollar glass-encased heap of stuffed animals, sewn together in an orgiastic conglomeration, which reddened my face even now. But I smiled, and the knot that had been absent since late winter shot a needle of pain through my gut. My Karen ulcer. You're still there. Still hurting me. At least it's you.

The second ring.

I peered up the staircase that ascended to the exposed second-floor hallway, and closing my eyes, I recalled the party I'd thrown just a week ago-guests laughing, talking politics and books, filling up my silence. I saw a man and a woman upstairs, elbows resting against the oak banister, overlooking the living room, the wet bar, and the kitchen. Holding their wineglasses, they waved down to me, smiling at their host.

The third ring.

My eyes fell on a photograph of my mother—a five-by-seven in a stained-glass frame, sitting atop the obsidian piano. She was the only family member with whom I maintained regular contact. Though I had relatives in the Pacific Northwest, Florida, and a handful in the Carolinas, I saw them rarely—at reunions, weddings, or funerals that my mother shamed me into attending with her. But with my father having passed away and a brother I hadn't seen in thirteen years, family meant little to me. My friends sustained me, and contrary to popular belief, I didn't have the true reclusive spirit imputed to me. I did need them.

In the photograph, my mother is squatting down at my father's grave, pruning a tuft of carmine canna lilies in the shadow of the headstone. But you can only see her strong, kind face among the blossoms, intent on tidying up her husband's plot of earth under that magnolia he'd taught me to climb, the blur of its waxy green leaves behind her.

The fourth ring.

"Did you see the body?"

It sounded as if the man were speaking through a towel. There was no emotion or hesitation in his staccato voice.

"Yes."

"I gutted her with your paring knife and hid the knife in your house. It has your fingerprints all over it." He cleared his throat. "Four months ago, you had blood work done by Dr. Xu. They misplaced a vial. You remember having to go back and give more?"

"Yes."

"I stole that vial. Some is on Rita Jones's white T-shirt. The rest is on the others."

"What others?"

"I make a phone call, and you spend the rest of your life in prison, possibly death row...."

"I just want you—"

"Shut your mouth. You'll receive a plane ticket in the mail. Take the flight. Pack clothes, toiletries, nothing else. You spent last summer in Aruba. Tell your friends you're going again."

"How did you know that?"

"I know many things, Andrew."

"I have a book coming out," I pleaded. "I've got readings scheduled. My agent-"

"Lie to her."

"She won't understand me just leaving like this."

"Fuck Cynthia Mathis. You lie to her for your safety, because if I even suspect you've brought someone along or that someone knows, you'll go to jail or you'll die. One or the other, guaranteed. And I hope you aren't stupid enough to trace this number. I promise you it's stolen."

"How do I know I won't be hurt?"

"You don't. But if I get off the phone with you and I'm not convinced you'll be on that flight, I'll call the police tonight. Or I may visit you while you're sleeping. You've got to put that Smith and Wesson away sometime."

I stood up and spun around, the gun clenched in my sweaty hands. The house was silent, though chimes on the deck were clanging in a zephyr. I looked through the large living room windows at the black lake, its wind-rippled surface reflecting the pier lights. The blue light at the end of Walter's pier shone out across the water from a distant inlet. His "Gatsby light," we called it. My eyes scanned the grass and the edge of the trees, but it was far too dark to see anything in the woods.

"I'm not in the house," he said. "Sit down."

I felt something well up inside of me-anger at the fear, rage at this injustice.

"Change of plan," I said. "I'm going to hang up, dial nine one one, and take my chances. You can go-"

"If you aren't motivated by self-preservation, there's an old woman named Jeanette I could-"

"I'll kill you."

"Sixty-five, lives alone, I think she'd love the company. What do you think? Do I have to visit your mother to show you I'm serious? What is there to consider? Tell me you'll be on that plane, Andrew. Tell me so I don't have to visit your mother tonight."

"I'll be on that plane."

The phone clicked, and he was gone.

LOCKED DOORS

Published July 2005 by Thomas Dunne Books

DESCRIPTION: Seven years ago, suspense novelist Andrew Thomas's life was shattered when he was framed for a series of murders. The killer's victims were unearthed on Andrew's lakefront property, and since he was wanted by the FBI, Andrew had no choice but to flee and to create a new identity. Andrew does just that in a cabin tucked away in the remote wilderness near Haines Junction, Yukon. His only link to society is by e-mail, through which he learns that all the people he ever loved are being stalked and murdered. Culminating in the spooky and secluded Outer Banks of North Carolina, the paths of Andrew Thomas, a psychotic named Luther Kite, and a young female detective collide. *Locked Doors* is a novel of blistering suspense that will scare you to death.

Crouch quite simply is a marvel. *Locked Doors* is as good as anything I've read all year, a stay-up-all-night thriller that will have you chewing your fingers down to the nub even as you're reading its last paragraph. Highest possible recommendation.

BOOKREPORTER

Palpable suspense. Non-stop action. Relentless and riveting. Blake Crouch is the most exciting new thriller writer I've read in years.

DAVID MORRELL

Excerpt from Locked Doors...

The headline on the Arts and Leisure page read: Publisher to Reissue Five Thrillers by Alleged Murderer Andrew Z. Thomas.

All it took was seeing his name.

Karen Prescott dropped The New York Times and walked over to the window.

Morning light streamed across the clutter of her cramped office--query letters and sample chapters stacked in two piles on the floor beside the desk, a box of galleys shoved under the credenza. She peered out the window and saw the fog dissolving, the microscopic crawl of traffic now materializing on Broadway through the cloud below.

Leaning against a bookcase that housed many of the hardcovers she'd guided to publication, Karen shivered. The mention of Andrew's name always unglued her.

For two years she'd been romantically involved with the suspense novelist and had even lived with him during the writing of *Blue Murder* at the same lake house in North Carolina where many of his victims were found.

She considered it a latent character defect that she'd failed to notice anything sinister in Andy beyond a slight reclusive tendency.

My God, I almost married him.

She pictured Andy reading to the crowd in that Boston bookshop the first time they met. In a bathrobe writing in his office as she brought him fresh coffee (French roast, of course). Andy making love to her in a flimsy rowboat in the middle of Lake Norman.

She thought of his dead mother.

The exhumed bodies from his lakefront property.

His face on the FBI website.

They'd used his most recent jacket photo, a black-and-white of Andy in a sports jacket sitting broodingly at the end of his pier.

During the last few years she'd stopped thinking of him as Andy. He was Andrew Thomas now and embodied all the horrible images the cadence of those four syllables invoked.

There was a knock.

Scott Boylin, publisher of Ice Blink Press's literary imprint, stood in the doorway dressed in his best bib and tucker. Karen suspected he was gussied up for the Doubleday party.

He smiled, waved with his fingers.

She crossed her arms, leveled her gaze.

God, he looked streamlined today--very tall, fit, crowned by thick black hair with dignified intimations of silver.

He made her feel little. In a good way. Because Karen stood nearly six feet tall, few men towered over her. She loved having to look up at Scott.

They'd been dating clandestinely for the last four months. She'd even given him a key to her apartment, where they spent countless Sundays in bed reading manuscripts, the coffee-stained pages scattered across the sheets.

But last night she'd seen him at a bar in SoHo with one of the cute interns. Their rendezvous did not look work-related.

"Come to the party with me," he said. "Then we'll go to Il Piazza. Talk this out. It's not what you--"

"I've got tons of reading to catch up--"

"Don't be like that, Karen. Come on."

"I don't think it's appropriate to have this conversation here, so . . ."

He exhaled sharply through his nose and the door closed hard behind him.

Joe Mack was stuffing his pink round face with a gyro when his cell phone started ringing to the tune of "Staying Alive."

He answered, cheeks exploding with food, "This Joe."

"Hi, yes, um, I've got a bit of an interesting problem."

"Whath?"

"Well, I'm in my apartment, but I can't get the deadbolt to turn from the inside."

Joe Mack choked down a huge mouthful, said, "So you're locked in."

"Exactly."

"Which apartment?" He didn't even try to mask the annoyance in his voice.

"Twenty-two eleven."

"Name?"

"Um . . . I'm not the tenant. I'm Karen Prescott's friend. She's the--"

"Yeah, I get it. You need to leave anytime soon?"

"Well, yeah, I don't want to--"

Joe Mack sighed, closed the cell phone, and devoured the last of the gyro.

Wiping his hands on his shirt, he heaved himself from a debilitated swivel chair and lumbered out of the office, locking the door behind him.

The lobby was quiet for midday and the elevator doors spread as soon as he pressed the button. He rode up wishing he'd bought three gyros for lunch instead of two.

The doors opened again and he walked onto the twenty-second floor, fishing the key ring containing the master from the pocket of his enormous overalls.

He belched.

It echoed down the empty corridor.

Man, was he hungry.

He stopped at 2211, knocked, yelled through the door, "It's the super!"

No one answered.

Joe Mack inserted the master into the deadbolt. It turned easily enough.

He pushed the door open.

"Hello?" he said, standing in the threshold, admiring the apartment--roomy, flat-screen television, lush deep blue carpet, an antique desk, great view of SoHo, probably loads of food in the fridge.

"Anybody home?"

He turned the deadbolt four times. It worked perfectly.

Another door opened somewhere in the hallway and approaching footsteps reverberated off the hardwood floor. Joe Mack glanced down the corridor at the tall man with black hair in a black overcoat strolling toward him from the stairwell.

"Hey, pal, were you the one who just called me?" Joe Mack asked.

The man with black hair stopped at the open doorway of 2211.

He smelled strange, of Windex and lemons.

"Yes, I was the one."

"Oh. You get the lock to work?"

"I've never been in this apartment."

"What the fuck did you call me for--"

Glint of a blade. The man held an ivory-hilted bowie. He swept its shimmering point across Joe Mack's swollen belly, cleaving denim, cotton, several layers of skin.

"No, wait just a second--"

The man raised his right leg and booted Joe Mack through the threshold.

The super toppled backward as the man followed him into the apartment, slammed the door, and shot the deadbolt home.

Karen left Ice Blink Press at 6:30 p.m. and emerged into a manic Manhattan evening, the sliver of sky between the buildings smoldering with dying sunlight, gilding glass and steel. It was the fourth Friday of October, the terminal brilliance of autumn full blown upon the city, and as she walked the fifteen blocks to her apartment in SoHo, Karen decided that she wouldn't start the manuscript in her leather satchel tonight.

Instead she'd slip into satin pajamas, have a glass of that organic chardonnay she'd purchased at Whole Foods Market, and watch wonderful mindless television.

It had been a bad week.

Pampering was in order.

At 7:55 she walked out of her bedroom in black satin pajamas that rubbed coolly against her skin. Her chaotic blond hair was twisted into a bun and held up by chopsticks from the Chinese food she'd ordered. Two unopened food cartons and a bottle of wine sat on the glass coffee table between the couch and the flat-screen television. Her apartment smelled of spicy-sweet sesame beef.

She plopped down and uncorked the wine.

Ashley Chambliss's CD *Nakedsongs* had ended and in the perfect stillness of her apartment Karen conceded how alone she was.

Thirty-seven.

Single again.

Childless.

But I'm not lonely, she thought, turning on the television and pouring a healthy glass of chardonnay.

I'm just alone.

There is a difference.

After watching *Dirty Dancing*, Karen treated herself to a soak. She'd closed the bathroom door and a Yankee candle that smelled of cookie dough sat burning in a glass jar on the sink, the projection of its restless flame flickering on the sweaty plaster walls.

Karen rubbed her long muscular legs together, slippery with bath oil. Imagining another pair of legs sliding between her own, she shut her eyes, moved her hands over her breasts, nipples swelling, then up and down her thighs.

The phone was ringing in the living room.

She wondered if Scott Boylin was calling to apologize. Wine encouraged irrational forgiveness in Karen. She even wished Scott were in the bathtub with her. She could feel the memory of his water-softened feet gliding up her smooth shinbones. Maybe she'd call and invite him over. Give him that chance to explain. He'd be back from the Doubleday party.

Now someone was knocking at the front door.

Karen sat up, blew back the bubbles that had amassed around her head.

Lifting her wineglass by the stem, she finished it off. Then she rose out of the water, took her white terrycloth bathrobe that lay draped across the toilet seat, and stepped unsteadily from the tub onto the mosaic tile. She'd nearly polished off the entire bottle of chardonnay and a warm and pleasant gale was raging in her head.

Karen crossed the living room, heading toward the front door.

She failed to notice that the cartons of steamed rice and sesame beef were gone, or that a large gray trashcan now stood between the television and the antique desk she'd inherited from her grandmother.

She peeked through the peephole.

A young man stood in the hallway holding an enormous bouquet of ruby red roses.

She smiled, turned the deadbolt, opened the door.

"I have a delivery for Karen Prescott."

"That's me."

The delivery man handed over the gigantic vase.

"Wait here. I'll get you your tip." She slurred her words a little.

"No ma'am, it's been taken care of." He gave her a small salute and left.

She relocked the door and carried the roses over to the kitchen counter. They were magnificent and they burgeoned from the cut-glass vase. She plucked the small card taped to the glass and opened it. The note read simply:

Look in the coat closet

Karen giggled. Scott was one hundred percent forgiven. Maybe she'd even do that thing he always asked for tonight.

She buried her nose in a rose, inhaled the damp sweet perfume. Then she cinched the belt of her bathrobe and walked over to the closet behind the couch, pulling open the door with a big smile that instantly died.

A naked man with black hair and a pale face peered down at her. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and swallowed.

The cartons of leftover Chinese food stood between his feet.

She stared into his black eyes, a coldness spreading through her.

"What do you think you're doing?" she said.

The man grinned, his member rising.

Karen bolted for the front door, but as she reached to unhook the chain he snatched a handful of her wet hair and swung her back into a mirror that shattered on the adjacent wall.

“Please,” she whimpered.

He punched her in the face.

Karen sank down onto the floor in bits of glass, anesthetized by wine and fear. Watching his bare feet, she wondered where her body would be found and by whom and in what condition.

He grabbed her hair into a ball with one hand and lifted her face out of the glass, the tiniest shards having already embedded themselves in her cheek.

He swung down.

She felt the dull thud of his knuckles crack her jaw, decided to feign unconsciousness.

He hit her again.

She didn't have to.

ABANDON

Published July 2009 by Minotaur Books

DESCRIPTION: On Christmas Day in 1893, every man, woman and child in a remote mining town will disappear, belongings forsaken, meals left to freeze in vacant cabins, and not a single bone will be found--not even the gold that was rumored to have been the pride of this town will be found either. One hundred and thirteen years later, two backcountry guides are hired by a leading history professor and his journalist daughter to lead them into the abandoned mining town to learn what happened. This has been done once before but the people that went in did not come out. With them is a psychic and a paranormal photographer--the town is rumored to be haunted. They've come to see a ghost town, but what they're about to discover is that twenty miles from civilization, with a blizzard bearing down, they are not alone, and the past is very much alive....

Crouch does a great job of pacing, going back and forth between the two stories and the two time periods. The characters are authentic and interesting. He keeps up the suspense until the very end. It's a great book. Crouch is a great writer. Go and get it.

TORONTO SUN

In *Abandon*, Crouch blends elements of modern-day Colorado with its violent and storied past to create a tapestry of love, greed and revenge... unforgettable.

JOHN HART

Excerpt from Abandon...

Thursday, December 28, 1893

Wind rips through the crags a thousand feet above, nothing moving in this godforsaken town, and the muleskinner knows that something is wrong. Two miles south stands Bartholomew Packer's mine, the Godsend, a twenty-stamp mill that should be filling this box canyon with the thudding racket of the rock-crushers pulverizing ore. The sound of the stamps in

operation is the sound of money being made, and only two things will stop them—Christmas and tragedy.

He dismounts his albino steed, the horse's pinked nostrils flaring, dirty mane matted with ice. The single-rig saddle is snow-crusting as well, its leather and cloth components—the mochila and shabrack—frozen stiff. He rubs George the horse's neck, speaking in soft, low tones he knows will calm the animal, telling him he did a good day's work and that a warm stable awaits with feed and fresh water.

The muleskinner opens his wallet, collects the pint of busthead he bought at a bodega in Silverton, and swallows the remaining mouthful, whiskey crashing into his empty stomach like iced fire.

He wades through waist-deep snow to the mercantile, bangs his shop-made on the doorframe. Inside, the lamps have been extinguished and the big stove squats dormant in the corner, unattended by the usual constellation of miners jawboning over coffee and tobacco. He calls for the owner as he crosses the board floor, moving between shelves, past stacked crates and burlap sacks bulging with sugar and flour.

"Jessup? It's Brady! You in back?"

The twelve burros crane their scrawny necks in his direction when Brady emerges from the merc. He reaches into his greatcoat, pulls out a tin of Star Navy tobacco, and shoves a chaw between lips and gums gone blackish purple in the last year.

"What the hell?" he whispers.

When he delivered supplies two weeks ago, this little mining town was bustling. Now Abandon looms listless before him in the gloom of late afternoon, streets empty, snow banked high against the unshoveled plank sidewalks, no tracks as far as he can see.

The cabins scattered across the lower slopes lie buried to their chimneys, and with not a one of them smoking, the air smells too clean.

Brady is a man at home in solitude, often days on the trail, alone in wild, quiet places, but this silence is all wrong—a lie. He feels menaced by it, and with each passing moment, more certain that something has happened here.

A wall of dark clouds scrapes over the peaks and snowflakes begin to speck the sleeves of his slicker. Here comes the wind. Chimes clang together over the doorway of the merc. It will be night soon.

He makes his way up the street into the saloon, still half-expecting Joss Maddox, the beautiful barkeep, to assault him with some gloriously profane greeting. No one's there. Not the mute piano player, not a single customer, and again, no light from the kerosene lamps, no warmth from the potbellied stove, just a half-filled glass on the pine bar, the beer frozen through.

The path to the nearest cabin lies beneath untrodden snow, and without webs, it takes five minutes to cover a hundred yards.

He pounds his gloved fist against the door, counts to sixty. The latch string hasn't been pulled in, and despite the circumstance, he still feels like a trespasser as he steps inside uninvited.

In the dark, his eyes strain to adjust.

Around the base of a potted spruce tree, crumpled pages of newspaper clutters the dirt floor—remnants of Christmas.

Food sits untouched on a rustic table, far too lavish to be any ordinary meal for the occupants of this cramped, one-room cabin. This was Christmas dinner.

He removes a glove, touches the ham—cold and hard as ore. A pot of beans have frozen in their broth. The cake feels more like pumice than sponge, and two jagged glass stems still stand upright, the wine having frozen and shattered the crystal cups.

Outside again, back with his pack train, he shouts, turning slowly in the middle of the street so the words carry in all directions.

“Anyone here?”

His voice and the fading echo of it sound so small rising against the vast, indifferent sweep of wilderness. The sky dims. Snow falls harder. The church at the north end of town disappears in the storm.

It's twenty miles back to Silverton, and the pack train has been on the trail since before first light. They need rest. Having skinned mules the last sixteen hours, he needs it, too, though the prospect of spending the night in Abandon, in this awful silence, unnerves him.

As he slips a boot into the stirrup, ready to drive the burros down to the stables, he notices something beyond the cribs at the south end of town. He puts George forward, trots through deep powder between the false-fronted buildings, and when he sees what caught his eye, whispers, “You old fool.”

Just a snowman scowling at him, spindly arms made of spruce branches. Pinecones for teeth and eyes. Garland for a crown.

He tugs the reins, turning George back toward town, and the jolt of seeing her provokes, “Lord God Amighty.”

He drops his head, tries to allay the thumping of his heart in the thin air. When he looks up again, the young girl is still there, perhaps six or seven, apparition-pale and just ten feet away, with locomotive-black curls and coal eyes to match—so dark and with such scant delineation between iris and pupil, they more resemble wet stones.

“You put a fright in me,” he says. “What are you doin out here all alone?”

She backpedals.

“Don’t be scart. I ain’t the bogeyman.” Brady alights, wades toward her through the snow. With the young girl in webs sunk only a foot in powder, and the muleskinner to his waist, he thinks it odd to stand eye to eye with a child.

“You all right?” he asks. “I didn’t think there was nobody here.”

The snowflakes stand out like white confetti in the child’s hair.

“They’re all gone,” she says, no emotion, no tears, just an unaffected statement of fact.

“Even your Ma and Pa?”

She nods.

“Where’d they all go to? Can you show me?”

She takes another step back, reaches into her gray woolen cloak. The single-action Army is a heavy sidearm, and it sags comically in the child’s hand so she holds it like a rifle, Brady too surprised to do a thing but watch as she struggles with the hammer.

“Okay, I’ll show you,” she says, the hammer locked back, sighting him up, her small finger already in the trigger guard.

“Now hold on, wait just a—”

“Stay still.”

“That ain’t no toy to point in someone’s direction. It’s for—”

“Killin. I know. You’ll feel better directly.”

As Brady scrambles for a way to rib up this young girl to hand him the gun, he hears the report ricocheting through the canyon, finds himself lying on his back, surrounded by a wall of snow.

In the oval of gray winter sky, the child’s face appears, looking down at him.

What in God’s—

“It made a hole in your neck.”

He attempts to tell her to stable George and the burros, see that they’re fed and watered. After all the work they put in today, they deserve at least that. Only gurgles emerge, and when he tries to breathe, his throat whistles.

She points the Army at his face again, one eye closed, the barrel slightly quivering, a parody of aiming.

He stares up into the deluge of snowflakes, the sky already immersed in bluish dusk that seems to deepen before his eyes, and he wonders, *Is the day really fading that fast, or am I?*

SNOWBOUND

Forthcoming June 2010 from Minotaur Books

DESCRIPTION: For Will Innis and his daughter, Devlin, the loss was catastrophic. Every day for the past five years, they wonder where she is, if she is—Will's wife, Devlin's mother—because Rachael Innis vanished one night during an electrical storm on a lonely desert highway, and suspected of her death, Will took his daughter and fled.

Now, Will and Devlin live under different names in another town, having carved out a new life for themselves as they struggle to maintain some semblance of a family.

When one night, a beautiful, hard-edged FBI agent appears on their doorstep, they fear the worst, but she hasn't come to arrest Will. "I know you're innocent," she tells him, "because Rachael wasn't the first...or the last." Desperate for answers, Will and Devlin embark on a terrifying journey that spans four thousand miles from the desert southwest to the wilds of Alaska, heading unaware into the heart of a nightmare, because the truth is infinitely worse than they ever imagined.

Excerpt from Snowbound...

1

In the evening of the last good day either of them would know for years to come, the girl pushed open the sliding glass door and stepped through onto the back porch.

"Daddy?"

Will Innis set the legal pad aside and made room for Devlin to climb into his lap. His daughter was small for eleven, felt like the shell of a child in his arms.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked and in her scratchy voice he could hear the remnants of her last respiratory infection like gravel in her lungs.

"Working up a closing for my trial in the morning."

"Is your client the bad guy again?"

Will smiled. "You and your mother. I'm not really supposed to think of it that way, sweetheart."

“What’d he do?” His little girl’s face had turned ruddy in the sunset and the fading light brought out threads of platinum in her otherwise midnight hair.

“He allegedly—”

“What’s that mean?”

“Allegedly?”

“Yeah.”

“Means it’s not been proven. He’s suspected of selling drugs.”

“Like what I take?”

“No, your drugs are good. They help you. He was selling, allegedly selling, bad drugs to people.”

“Why are they bad?”

“Because they make you lose control.”

“Why do people take them?”

“They like how it makes them feel.”

“How does it make them feel?”

He kissed her forehead and looked at his watch. “It’s after eight, Devi. Let’s go bang on those lungs.”

She sighed but she didn’t argue. She never tried to get out of it.

He stood up cradling his daughter and walked over to the redwood railing.

They stared into the wilderness that bordered Oasis Hills, their subdivision. The houses on

No-Water Lane

had the Sonoran Desert for a backyard.

“Look,” he said. “See them?” A half mile away, specks filed out of an arroyo and trotted across the desert toward a shadeless forest of giant saguaro cacti that looked vaguely sinister profiled against the horizon.

“What are they?” she asked.

“Coyotes. What do you bet they start yapping when the sun goes down?”

After supper, he read to Devlin from *A Wrinkle in Time*. They’d been working their way through the penultimate chapter, “Aunt Beast,” but Devlin was exhausted and drifted off before Will had finished the second page.

He closed the book and set it on the carpet and turned out the light. Cool desert air flowed in through an open window. A sprinkler whispered in the next door neighbor's yard. Devlin yawned, made a cooing sound that reminded him of rocking her to sleep as a newborn. Her eyes fluttered and she said very softly, "Mom?"

"She's working late at the clinic, sweetheart."

"When's she coming back?"

"Few hours."

"Tell her to come in and kiss me?"

"I will."

He was nowhere near ready for court in the morning but he stayed, running his fingers through Devlin's hair until she'd fallen back to sleep. Finally, he slid carefully off the bed and walked out onto the deck to gather up his books and legal pads. He had a late night ahead of him. A pot of strong coffee would help.

Next door, the sprinklers had gone quiet.

A lone cricket chirped in the desert.

Thunderless lightning sparked somewhere over Mexico, and the coyotes began to scream.

2

The thunderstorm caught up with Rachael Innis thirty miles north of the Mexican border. It was 9:30 p.m., and it had been a long day at the free clinic in Sonoyta, where she volunteered her time and services once a week as a bilingual psychologist. The windshield wipers whipped back and forth. High beams lit the steam rising off the pavement, and in the rearview mirror, Rachael saw the pair of headlights a quarter of a mile back that had been with her for the last ten minutes.

Glowing beads suddenly appeared on the shoulder just ahead. She jammed her foot into the brake pedal, the Grand Cherokee fishtailing into the oncoming lane before skidding to a stop. A doe and her fawn ventured into the middle of the road, mesmerized by the headlights. Rachael let her forehead fall onto the steering wheel, closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath.

The deer moved on. She accelerated the Cherokee, another dark mile passing as pellets of hail hammered the hood.

The Cherokee veered sharply toward the shoulder and she nearly lost control again, trying to correct her bearing, but the steering wheel wouldn't straighten out. Rachael lifted her foot off the gas pedal and eased over onto the side of the road.

When she killed the ignition all she could hear was the rain and hail drumming on the roof. The car that had been following her shot by. She set her glasses in the passenger seat, opened the door, and stepped down into a puddle that engulfed her pumps. The downpour soaked through her black suit. She shivered. It was pitch-black between lightning strikes and she moved forward carefully, feeling her way along the warm metal of the hood.

A slash of lightning hit the desert just a few hundred yards out. It set her body tingling, her ears ringing. I'm going to be electrocuted. There came a train of earsplitting strikes, flashbulbs of electricity that lit the sky just long enough for her to see that the tires on the driver side were still intact.

Her hands trembled now. A tall saguaro stood burning like a cross in the desert. She groped her way over to the passenger side as marble-size hail collected in her hair. The desert was electrified again, spreading wide and empty all around her.

In the eerie blue light she saw that the front tire on the passenger side was flat.

Back inside the Cherokee, Rachael sat behind the steering wheel, mascara trailing down her cheeks like sable tears. She wrung out her long black hair and massaged the headache building between her temples. Her purse lay in the passenger floorboard. She dragged it into her lap and shoved her hand inside, rummaging for the cell phone. She found it, tried her husband's number, but there was no service in the storm.

Rachael looked into the back of the Cherokee at the spare. She had no way of contacting AAA and passing cars would be few and far between on this remote highway at this hour of the night. I'll just wait and try Will again when the storm has passed.

Squeezing the steering wheel, she stared through the windshield into the stormy darkness, somewhere north of the border in OrganPipeCactusNational Monument. Middle of nowhere.

There was a brilliant streak of lightning. In the split second illumination she saw a black Escalade parked a hundred yards up the shoulder.

Thunder rattled the windows. Five seconds elapsed. When the sky exploded again, Rachael felt a strange, unnerving pull to look through the driver side window.

A man swung a crowbar through the glass.

3

Will startled back into consciousness, disoriented and thirsty. It was so quiet—just the discreet drone of a computer fan and the second hand of the clock ticking in the adjacent bedroom. He found himself slouched in the leather chair at the desk in his small home office, the CPU still purring, the monitor switched into sleep mode.

As he yawned, everything rushed back in a torrent of anxiety. He'd been hammering out notes for his closing argument and hit a wall at ten o'clock. The evidence was damning. He was going to lose. He'd only closed his eyes for a moment to clear his head.

He reached for the mug of coffee and took a sip. Winced. It was cold and bitter. He jostled the mouse. When the screen restored, he looked at the clock and realized he wouldn't be sleeping anymore tonight. It was 4:09 a.m. He was due in court in less than five hours.

First things first—he needed an immediate and potent infusion of caffeine.

His office adjoined the master bedroom at the west end of the house, and passing through on his way to the kitchen, he noticed a peculiar thing. He'd expected to see his wife buried under the myriad quilts and blankets on their bed, but she wasn't there. The comforter was smooth and taut, undisturbed since they'd made it up yesterday morning.

He walked through the living room into the den and down the hallway toward the east end of the house. Rachael had probably come home, seen him asleep at his desk, and gone in to kiss Devlin. She'd have been exhausted from working all day at the clinic. She'd probably fallen asleep in there. He could picture the nightlight glow on their faces as he reached his daughter's door.

It was cracked, exactly as he'd left it seven hours ago when he'd put Devlin to bed.

He eased the door open. Rachael wasn't with her.

Will wide awake now, closing Devlin's door, heading back into the den.

"Rachael? You here, hon?"

He went to the front door, turned the deadbolt, stepped outside.

Dark houses. Porchlights. Streets still wet from the thunderstorms that blew through several hours ago. No wind, the sky clearing, bright with stars.

When he saw them in the driveway, his knees gave out and he sat down on the steps and tried to remember how to breathe. One Beamer, no Jeep Cherokee, and a pair of patrol cars, two uniformed officers coming toward him, their hats shelved under their arms.

The patrolmen sat in the living room on the couch, Will facing them in a chair. The smell of new paint was still strong. He and Rachael had redone the walls and the vaulted ceiling in terracotta last weekend. Most of the black and white desert photographs that adorned the room still leaned against the antique chest of drawers, waiting to be re-hung.

The lawmen were businesslike in their delivery, taking turns with the details, as if they'd rehearsed who would say what, their voices so terribly measured and calm.

There wasn't much information yet. Rachael's Cherokee had been found on the shoulder of Arizona 85 in OrganPipeCactusNational Monument. Right front tire flat, punctured with a nail to cause a slow and steady loss of air pressure. Driver side window busted out.

No Rachael. No blood.

They asked Will a few questions. They tried to sympathize. They said how sorry they were, Will just shaking his head and staring at the floor, a tightness in his chest, constricting his windpipe in a slow strangulation.

He happened to look up at some point, saw Devlin standing in the hall in a plain pink tee-shirt that fell all the way to the carpet, the tattered blanket she'd slept with every night since her birth draped over her left arm. And he could see in her eyes that she'd heard every word the patrolmen had said about her mother, because they were filling up with tears.

4

Rachael Innis was strapped upright with two-inch webbing to the leather seat behind the driver. She stared at the console lights. The digital clock read 4:32 a.m. She remembered the crowbar through the window and nothing after.

Bach's Four Lute Suites blared from the Bose stereo system, John Williams playing the classical guitar. Beyond the windshield, the headlights cut a feeble swath of light through the darkness, and even though she was riding in a luxury SUV, the shocks did little to ease the violent jarring from whatever primitive road they traveled.

Her wrists and ankles were comfortably but securely bound with nylon restraints. Her mouth wasn't gagged. From her vantage point, she could only see the back of the driver's head and occasionally the side of his face by the cherry glow of his cigarette. He was smooth-shaven, his hair was dark, and he smelled of a subtle, spicy cologne.

It occurred to her that he didn't know she was awake, but the thought wasn't two seconds old when she caught his eyes in the rearview mirror. They registered her consciousness, turned back to the road.

They drove on. An endless stream of rodents darted across the road ahead and a thought kept needling her—at some point, he was going to stop the car and do whatever he was driving her out in the desert to do.

"Have you urinated on my seat?" She thought she detected the faintest accent.

"No."

"You tell me if you have to urinate. I'll stop the car."

"Okay. Where are you—"

"No talking. Unless you have to urinate."

"I just—"

"You want your mouth taped? You have a cold. That would make breathing difficult."

Devlin was the only thing she'd ever prayed for and that was years ago, but as she watched the passing sagebrush and cactus through the deeply tinted windows, she pleaded with God again.

Now the Escalade was slowing. It came to a stop. He turned off the engine and stepped outside and shut the door. Her door opened. He stood watching her. He was very handsome, with flawless, brown skin (save for an indentation in the bridge of his nose), liquid blue eyes, and black hair greased back from his face. His pretty teeth seemed to gleam in the night. Rachael's chest heaved against the strap of webbing.

He said, "Calm down, Rachael." Her name sounded like a foreign word on his lips. He took out a syringe from his black leather jacket and uncapped the needle.

“What is that?” she asked.

“You have nice veins.” He ducked into the Escalade and turned her arm over. When the needle entered, she gasped.

“Please listen. If this is some kind of ransom thing—”

“No, no. You’ve already been purchased. In fact, right now, there isn’t a safer place in the world for you to be than in my possession.”

A gang of coyotes erupted in demonic howls somewhere out in that empty dark and Rachael thought they sounded like a woman burning alive, and she began to scream until the drug took her.

BLAKE CROUCH was born near the piedmont town of Statesville, North Carolina in 1978. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and graduated in 2000 with degrees in English and Creative Writing. Blake lives with his family in southwest Colorado, where he is at work on a new book. His website is www.blakecrouch.com.

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Blake's Works Available on Kindle

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Locked Doors (sequel to Desert Places)

Abandon

Snowbound (coming June 2010)

Four Live Rounds – Collected Short Stories

Perfect Little Town – horror novella

Serial Uncut – novella with J.A. Konrath and Jack Kilborn

Luminous Blue – short novel – coming soon to Kindle

Visit Blake at www.BlakeCrouch.com